



STOCKING THE KIT: Undergraduate Stage Management Training in the United States

By Laurie Kineman

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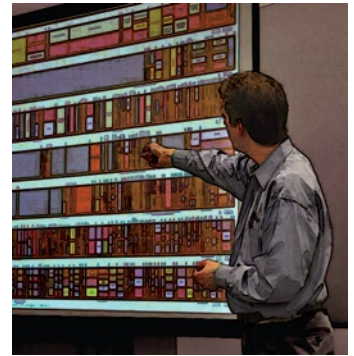
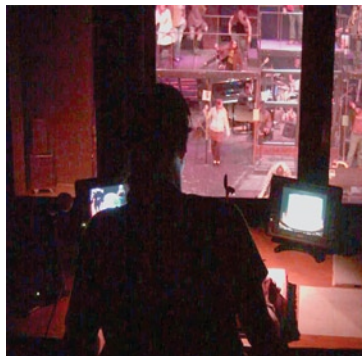
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STOCKING

the *kit*

UNDERGRADUATE STAGE MANAGEMENT TRAINING IN THE UNITED STATES

by Laurie Kincman



A stage manager is an essential member of almost every theatrical production. He or she serves as the clearinghouse of information, and is responsible for coordinating rehearsals and running performances. Good stage managers tend to be part artist, part technician, and part organizational wizard. They need self-confidence, a healthy dose of compassion, and a sense of humor. And, to succeed in a very competitive business, stage managers must possess the motivation to initiate tasks and follow them through to completion.

The complex set of skills required to perform the duties of a stage manager would certainly seem to require specialized training. And as the entertainment industry evolves and technologies change, more skills and experiences will be needed. I have been training stage managers for nearly a decade. Each time I look at an undergraduate plan of study I struggle with how to find time to address it all—balancing theatre basics, specific stage management classes, general education requirements, and time for students to just mature and experience life on their own, away from home.

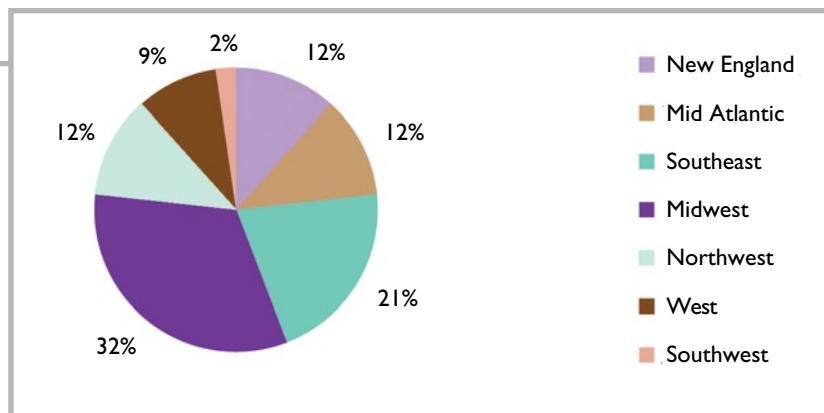
That struggle led me to wonder how my approach to training stage managers compared to the paths taken by my colleagues around the country. Is the conservatory-style training of a BFA program a better way to produce successful stage managers? Does the BA's general approach provide a good foundation or is little of everything actually not quite enough of anything?

THE SURVEY UNIVERSE

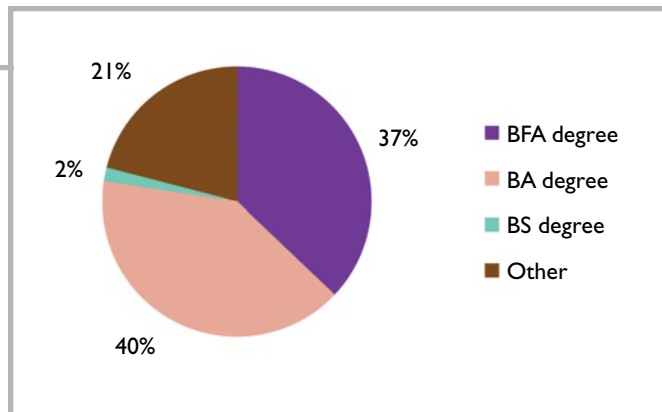
To answer these questions, I conducted a survey of stage management training programs in the U.S. Concluded in 2009, 108 colleges and universities across the country were invited to respond to a web-based questionnaire. These schools included public and private schools, from each of the fifty states, with a variety of degree programs. Sixty-four percent of the schools I contacted provided detailed information about their curricular and extra-curricular programs.

As shown in chart 1, the responding schools represent a good cross-section of the invited group. They were split evenly between public and private universities, and, while most responses came from schools in the Midwest, followed by the Southeast, programs in all areas of the country participated in the study.

■ 1. Where are you located?



■ 2. My program offers undergraduate training for stage managers in a _____



Survey respondents were given the choice to reply anonymously and many did so. Of the forty-two schools that provided contact information, many agreed to let me follow up with a few more questions about their specific programs.

Seventy-seven percent of the responding schools offer BFA or BA degrees in stage management (chart 2). Two percent offer the BS degree and twenty-one percent have no specialization option in stage management. Those schools listed the following among the methods for a young stage manager to receive training at their institution:

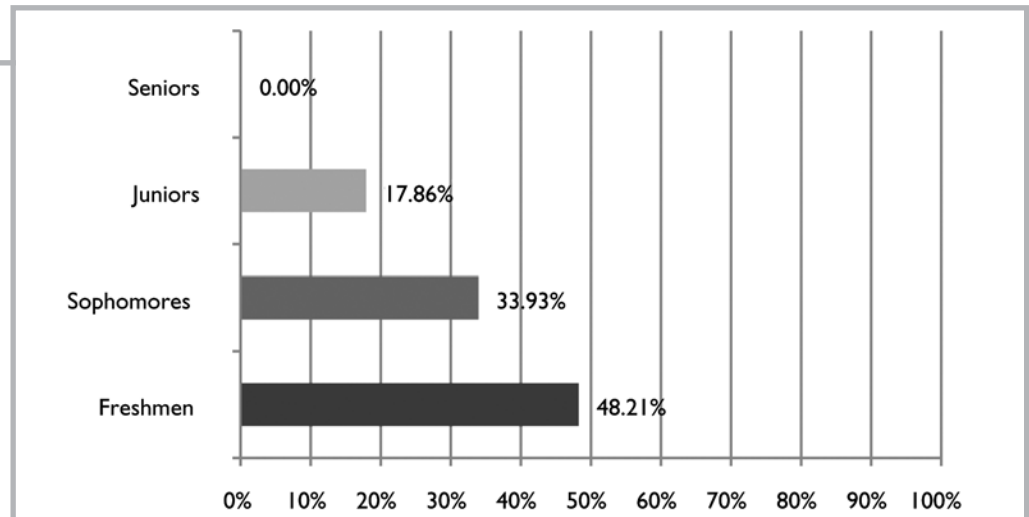
- in a design and technology program with a focus on stage managing;
- in courses and workshops on stage managing;
- in one class and then on to the show!
- solely through the practicum requirements of their theatre degree.

THE STUDENTS

Responding instructors were asked a series of questions about the students working as stage managers in their departments. Most report they have just a few stage managers working on multiple productions. Some colleges and universities with dedicated degrees in stage management, particularly a BFA, boast larger numbers, but this is the exception rather than the rule.

In my own teaching I often acknowledge when a student has what I have nicknamed “the stage management gene”—a predisposition to the complex communication and organizational skills that are required of stage managers. These are the students I encourage to follow the training program at my university and possibly pursue a career in stage management. Many students choose this path without my prompting. Most undergraduates identify their interest to pursue a career in stage management within the first two years of college (chart 3).

■ 3. Students typically join our stage management program as...



■ 4. When evaluating applicants, how important are the following?

Previous stage management experience

| | |
|--------------------|-----|
| Essential | 8% |
| Very Important | 17% |
| Somewhat Important | 40% |
| Not Important | 35% |

Previous technical theatre experience

| | |
|--------------------|-----|
| Essential | 0 % |
| Very Important | 40% |
| Somewhat Important | 48% |
| Not Important | 12% |

Previous acting experience

| | |
|--------------------|-----|
| Essential | 0 % |
| Very Important | 6% |
| Somewhat Important | 57% |
| Not Important | 37% |

Internships or volunteer work in theatre outside of school

| | |
|--------------------|-----|
| Essential | 0 % |
| Very Important | 6% |
| Somewhat Important | 62% |
| Not Important | 32% |

Theatre portfolio

| | |
|--------------------|-----|
| Essential | 6% |
| Very Important | 27% |
| Somewhat Important | 40% |
| Not Important | 27% |

Personal interview or written statement

| | |
|--------------------|-----|
| Essential | 38% |
| Very Important | 29% |
| Somewhat Important | 12% |
| Not Important | 21% |

Giving students time to self-select a specialization in stage management is a tricky prospect for a theatre department. The importance of the stage manager to every theatre production is not significantly different in an academic environment than it is in the professional arena. Many programs admit that their student pool of stage managers is not large enough.

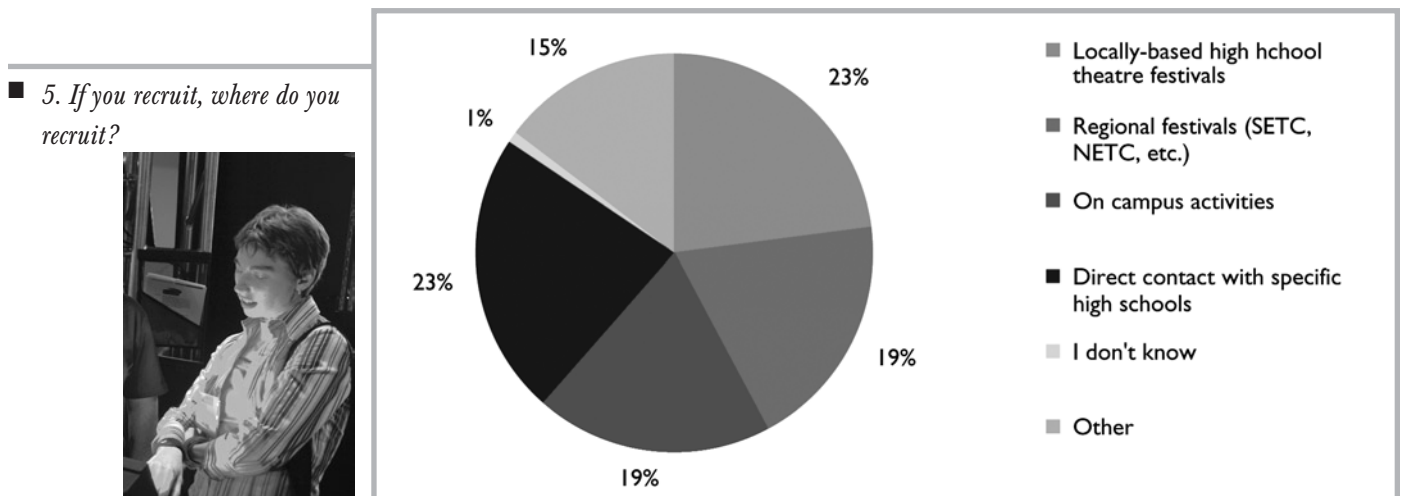
Therefore, college theatre departments need to devote some recruitment efforts to finding stage managers, or at least those with the interest and preliminary background. My personal experience has shown me that the level of theatre production in high schools varies widely, which naturally leads to a broad variance in high school stage management experience. Even the definition of a stage manager can change—some high schools entrust the student with all the traditional roles and responsibilities including crew management and cue calling, while others use the faculty director to execute cues and limit the students to wrangling actors and presetting props.

With that disparity, it is perhaps unreasonable to expect a great deal of specificity in a high school senior's background. So what do departments look for? The consensus appears to be a combination of experiences and the ability to articulate yourself and your interests (chart 4).

Beyond these specific choices, respondents were given the chance to identify other factors influencing acceptance into their theatre department. Sample responses included:

- well-roundedness and the willingness to accept criticism;
- attitude, eagerness, desire, openness to new things;
- communication skills;
- maturity;
- problem-solving skills;
- the ability to present themselves well;
- personal traits such as self-motivation, maturity, and sense of humor.

Sixty percent of the survey respondents stated that they specifically recruit stage management students, and do so at a variety of locations (chart 5). The remaining forty percent attributed the presence of interested students to factors ranging from indirect exposure and transfer into the department to simple luck.

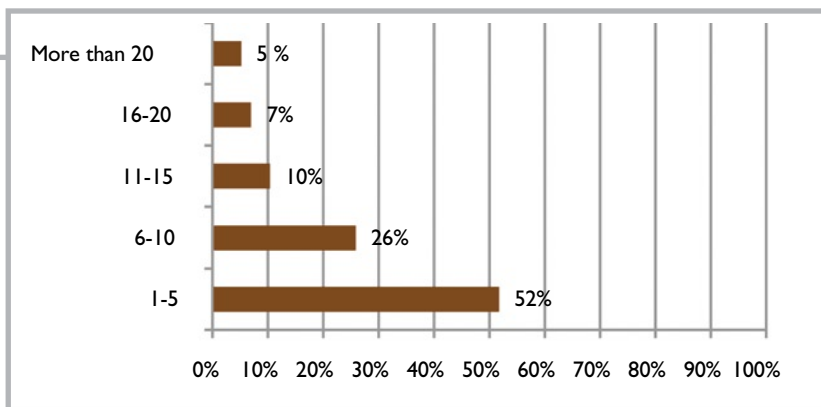


How successful are these efforts?

Jennifer Cleary of Brandeis University (with a BA program) reported at the time of the survey that the department had only “one student who I feel comfortable assigning to productions.” She continued by describing the show assignments. [This student] will get one show, and professionals will cover the other four shows. My up-and-coming students will ASM.” Washington University in St. Louis (a program without specific training in stage management) employs a combination of “capable work study students as well as area professionals.” In contrast, programs including Penn State and the University of Minnesota in Duluth felt well-stocked with undergraduate stage managers at survey time.

It is clear that success varies. In my own efforts to recruit stage management students, I have observed that exposure is a big part of the equation. Because high school programs are as varied as they are, not all incoming college students know that theatre is a valid degree path, let alone that specific training in stage management exists. Sometimes it is a matter of introducing the job and its skills to a broader population—during introductory classes in acting or theatre technology, or even to non-majors who may be enrolled in a theatre appreciation class to fulfill a general education requirement.

- 6. Typically there are _____ students studying stage management in my program.



THE TRAINING

No matter how the stage management students arrive at a particular program, it is the content of their education that will allow expectations to match achievements in college theatre and beyond. With several degree options available to potential students, I wanted to know how these programs compared to one another in terms of the basic skills and courses they included.

Surprisingly there were more similarities than differences. Both in terms of required courses and elective options, nearly all stage management programs appear to agree that in order to coordinate a theatre production and communicate with all of the artists and technicians involved, a broad curricular path is the best preparation (chart 6).

The most popular required courses are in technical production and acting, along with optional courses in a variety of complementary subjects from which students may choose (charts 7 and 8).

- 7. A stage management student in my program is required to take (check all that apply)

| | |
|----------------------------------|-----|
| Acting classes | 16% |
| Directing classes | 13% |
| Technical production classes | 18% |
| Introductory design classes | 18% |
| Advanced design classes | 3% |
| Music classes | 3% |
| Other classes within department | 18% |
| Other classes outside department | 11% |

- 8. A stage management student in my program can choose to take (check all that apply)

| | |
|----------------------------------|-----|
| Acting classes | 8% |
| Directing classes | 10% |
| Technical production classes | 9% |
| Introductory design classes | 9% |
| Advanced design classes | 16% |
| Music classes | 15% |
| Other classes within department | 17% |
| Other classes outside department | 16% |

But the expectations of a stage manager go beyond artfully called cues and exquisitely organized backstage paperwork. At the heart of the job is an ability to solve problems, communicate, and play well with others. And while many theatre courses will directly or indirectly help a student develop these traits, it is common for students to go outside the department for part of their education.

Colleges and universities typically place a maximum number of credits on a student's degree. This will include general education requirements, courses in a major, and often courses in a minor. This can potentially hamper a department's ability to expand the student stage manager's curricular base.

I always encourage students to be out of our department and taking courses elsewhere, just to be more well-rounded students and more interesting human beings. I often mention psychology in my courses, but they are not required in the major, because we are a BA program and don't have room for these courses.

Jennifer Cleary,
Brandeis University

At the University of Miami, non-theatre courses in leadership and personnel management are built into the BFA curriculum. Cynthia Kocher shared with me that “In addition to the gen eds, BFA stage management majors specifically are required to take Business Analytics, Interpersonal Communication, Public Speaking and Organizational Behavior—all offered in the Communication and Business schools. There is also a list of several other business, psychology, and communication classes that they are encouraged to take as electives.”

Chuck Meacham's students at the University of Evansville have to take “one of two management classes in the school of business and either an accounting class or a group communication class.”

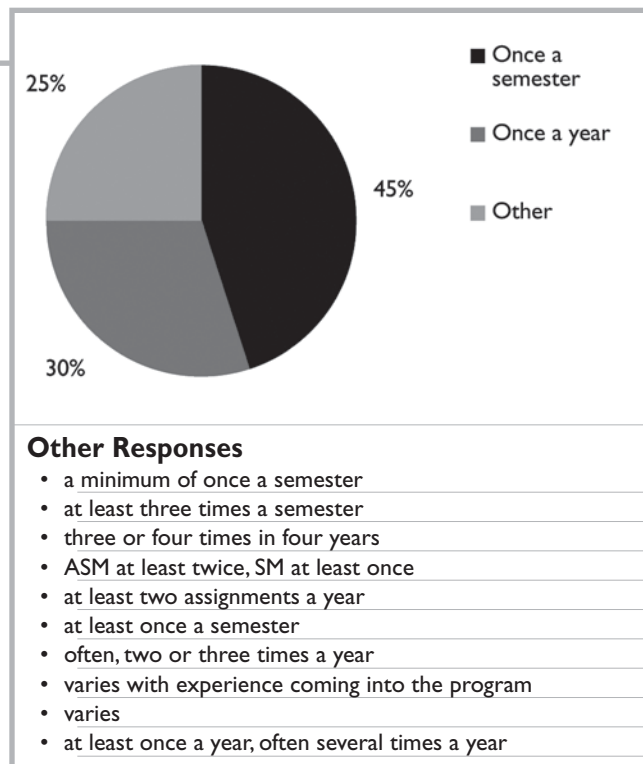
Travis DeCastro of Penn State University reported the other side of this coin. Classes in business, psychology, etc, used to be required when the BFA degree was 129 units. A university mandate reduced the overall degree to 120 units, and outside courses are now “strongly encouraged electives.” Such is also the case with programs including the University of South Dakota, the University of Minnesota, Duluth, and undoubtedly many others.

LEARNING IN THE TRENCHES

The most important component of a young stage manager's education, I would argue, is that time spent working as a stage manager or assistant stage manager on department productions. Very few classroom exercises can equal the amount of learning that happens on the job.

While most theatre programs seem to agree with this assessment, it is not unanimous (chart 9). Nearly seventy-four percent of the respondents require stage management students to acquire practical experience in order to graduate, which leaves twenty-six percent of the responding programs without a mandate. Within this minority, some schools acknowledge that students opt to work as a stage manager or assistant stage manager outside of specific program requirements and credits for graduation, but in some instances it is a solely classroom-based background that students take out into the real world.

■ 9. Students serve as stage managers or assistant stage managers...

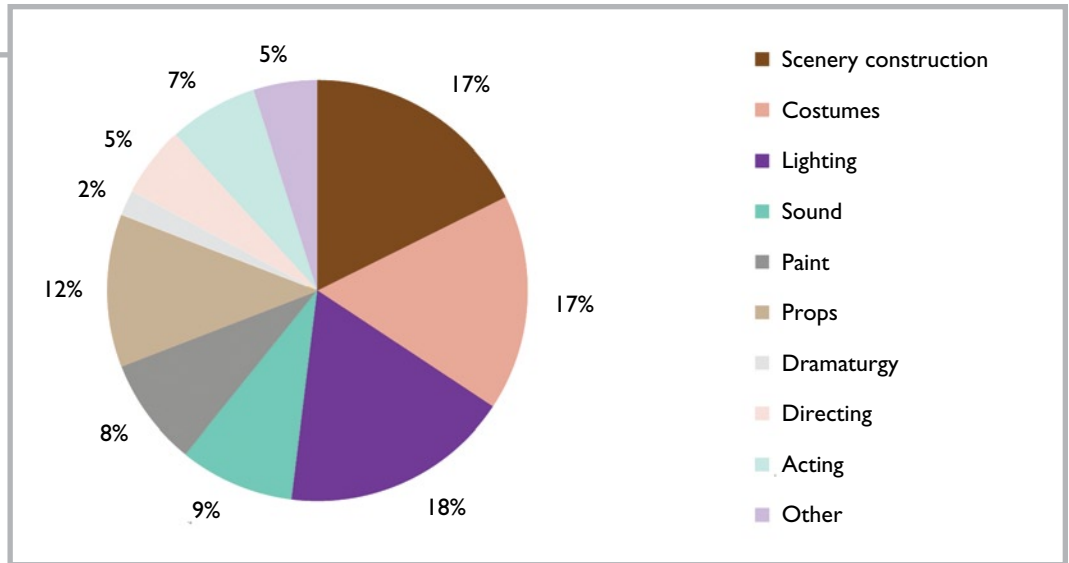


Of the programs that do require practical experience, all of them reported that students must work as both a stage manager and ASM during their college careers. This practical experience varies in frequency. Some programs require or allow students to work on a show every semester; others specify a target number of assignments by graduation.

Required production assignments outside of stage management also vary (chart 10). Nearly eighty-three percent of the respondents include other hands-on experience in a stage manager's education. This can be defined as a practicum or lab-only class in a specific production area without a corresponding classroom instruction session. And of those who don't require such an experience, over seventy-eight percent include this in the student's elective options.

Comments from those selecting "other" in the question associated with chart 10 include front of house, box office, run crew, wardrobe crew, or simply a requirement for a specified number of such experiences with no specific areas required.

■ 10. Practical work in other areas is required for graduation. If yes, check all that apply.



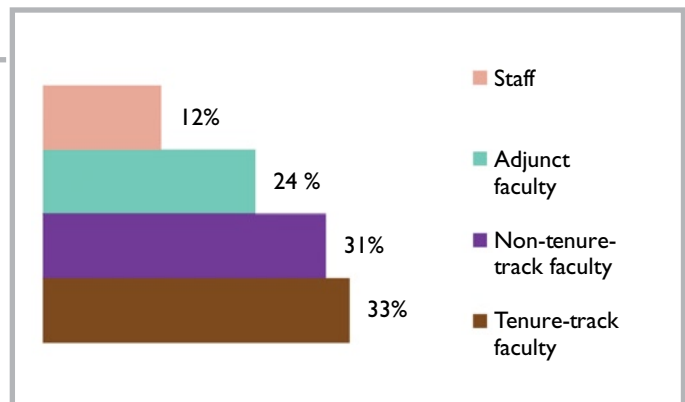
THE FACULTY

Just as the size and structure of undergraduate stage management programs vary throughout the U.S., so does the approach to providing specific mentoring and instruction.

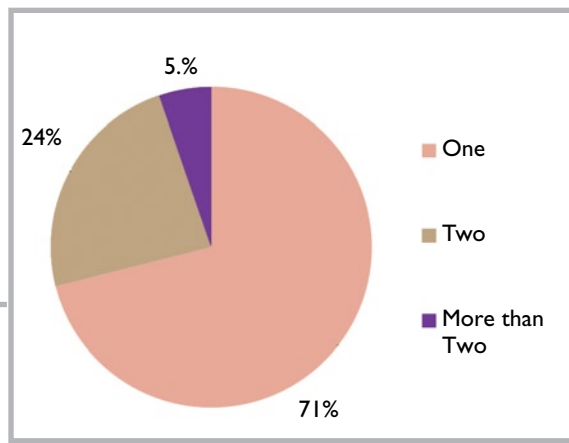
As a starting point, I asked each responding department if stage management instruction was done by dedicated faculty specifically hired for that purpose. Seventy-four percent of the responding programs said yes.

Of those schools with that specificity, most have only one such expert in the department (chart 12). It was exceedingly rare to find more than two faculty members participating in the SM program. The hiring classifications also range from instructional staff to tenure-track faculty (chart 11). For those departments unable to hire faculty or staff with a specific stage management background to oversee this area, the appropriate candidate is most often a member of the design faculty. Other qualified personnel include the TD, or a Production Manager without a stage management background (chart 12).

■ 11. Stage management instruction is a _____ position at my college/university.

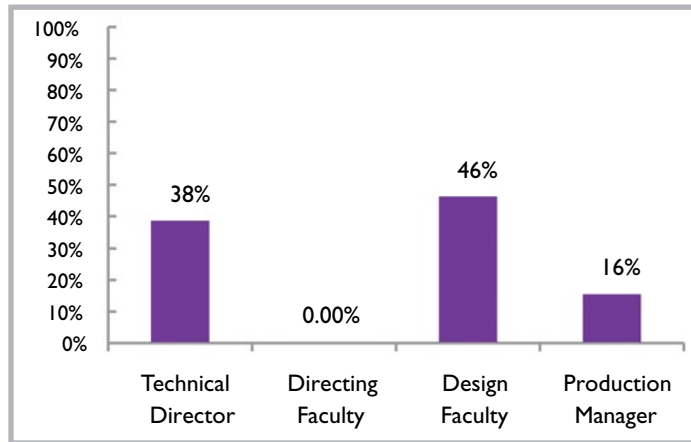


■ *If yes, how many?*



■ 12. My college/university has dedicated faculty who specifically educate stage management students.

■ *If no, who educates your stage managers?*



But regardless of who holds the appointment as the primary instructor for the stage management students, one factor appears to be universal: in addition to any classroom work, instruction should take the form of individual mentoring—often in greater quantity.

Mentoring is identified by the respondents as the key to success for their stage management students. Whether that mentoring is a complement to or a substitute for formalized course work, it is a necessity.

Perhaps this is due to the subtlety required. I know that I am best able to help a student stage manager when my help can be tied to a specific production. It is one thing to lecture about the difference between word-based and visual cues, but it is another to help a student notice what an actor does just before making a cross and to call a cue on that moment. Similarly, advice required to negotiate a particularly hairy disagreement between production team members will be most successful when it is specific to the topic at hand.

While at Indiana University, David Grindle took a strategic approach. “Each student has an hour per week of mentoring when they are lead SM on a show,” he said. “This is in addition to their course work. Additionally, I am with them at all techs and first dresses to make sure they are doing well.” Cynthia Kocher has a similar formula allowing for observation and feedback at key times (see quote, below).

An equally valuable aspect of mentoring occurs between peers. Several respondents comment on the pairing of experienced and novice stage management students or weekly group discussions as ways to both stretch limited faculty availability and to provide a “safe” arena for asking questions. This could be the seeming silly question a new SM student doesn’t want to ask a faculty member to avoid looking unprepared, or the strategic question to a fellow stage manager who has faced the same situation in the past.

I expect (the students) to learn how to do something in class, and then practice it when they are assigned to a show. For example, when they are working on a production, I meet weekly with the SM team. In addition, I observe rehearsals once a week and am in constant communication with the faculty director. Once we get to tech, I am at all techs up through and including the first dress rehearsal. During performances, I continue to check in with the SM team as needed.

Cynthia Kocher
University of Miami

BEYOND THE NEST

When all the classes and productions come to an end, it will be time for that young stage manager to enter the professional world. Some will seek out employment in one of the many the professional theatre companies in the U.S. Others will head for New York and split time between showcase productions and a pay-the-rent-job until making it to Broadway. Still others will return to an area close to home and put their skills to use in smaller venues.

But where do we as instructors think they will fare best? The final section of the survey focused on next steps—where our students have gone and how we think we have done to prepare them.

Understandably, those departments without specific stage management training report more mixed results than those with a targeted emphasis or program. Multiple respondents completed questions about placement with an answer that was some variation of “better than the actors but not quite as well as the design/tech students.”

Other programs can document strong successes. David Grindle’s stage management alums have the “highest placement rate outside of the PhD.” Travis DeCastro defines his approach as “producing the best ASMs in the country who may be the best SMs in the country in three years. They aren’t ready to jump in to a LORT SM position—and shouldn’t be.”

CONTEXT, CONCLUSIONS, AND QUERIES

The launching point for this research was my desire to know if there is one best method for stage management education. Analysis of the data leads me to conclude that no such formula exists. However, it seems clear from this survey that a solid core of basic theatre courses supplemented with focused knowledge leads to the most promising young stage manager—one who can speak the language of all the production areas, can execute required tasks such as reports, organizational paperwork, and calling cues, and demonstrates good critical thinking and communication skills.

But it is also clear that stage management students don’t all need to obtain these skills in exactly the same way. For instance, as long as a stage manager is capable of helping a novice light board operator solve a problem during a performance, it is not important where that knowledge came from. Perhaps he or she took an introductory class in lighting technology, perhaps the stage manager has experience as a lighting technician, or perhaps he or she listened and watched carefully when designers were cueing the show.

The fact that seventy-seven percent of the schools participating in the survey offer BFA or BA programs with a stage management curriculum clearly indicates that there is virtue in formalized training. Students with any kind of guidance will fare better than those who must try to put it together on their own. BFA students will take more theatre courses, likely including more targeted classroom sessions on stage management specifics. BA students, even with an emphasis in stage management, will have a more broad-based degree, receiving more of their specific stage management training in production situations. But while each of these degrees has its individual merits, the fact that they share so many learning objectives shows that one is not overwhelmingly superior to the other.

Thirteen percent of the theatre departments surveyed completed only the basic questions because, as they reported, “we don’t have stage management training.” While compiling the initial survey invitation list, I had confirmed that each department produced at least one show a semester and had done so for several years. Since we can assume that most if not all of these productions needed stage managers, the negative response might indicate a lack of specific stage management faculty.

Obviously not all college programs have the resources to hire stage management experts, nor am I suggesting that they should. Yet we can expect that every theatre program will have a small band of dedicated stage management students, complemented by others with the need for an elective, a curiosity about backstage work, or other such temporary motives, and we need to do our best to prepare them for the process and help them along the way.

The combination of formalized instruction and practical application is key, no matter the size of the department. And a scarcity of advanced course work can be supplemented with one-on-one mentoring.

As instructors, we should look for both early interest and strong aptitude, recognizing that not all students will come to us knowing what a stage manager does. We should strive for a curriculum that can address all the information areas and still allow a student some choice—in electives, methods of fulfilling general education requirements, or opportunities for internships and outside observations. In this way we can meet their needs both as stage managers in training and as young adults first venturing away from home.

I would argue that our most important responsibility as educators is to help our stage management students make the most of the opportunities our departments provide and then help them choose a post-graduation option best suited to fill in any gaps between their current experiences and future goals. This is the arena in which we are likely to see the biggest difference between BFA and BA graduates.

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee made a number of curricular changes a few years ago, during which their stage management training moved from a BFA to a BA degree. Steve White commented: “This was extremely unpopular with the students, but we believe the undergraduate training of SMs *must* be broad based to allow them to get the wide range of experiences they will need once they leave our program.” But he also noted, “Our more talented and driven alums that took advantage of summer stock and internship opportunities do well professionally without further training.”

To put my analysis of this research in its proper context, I offer a bit of my own biography and background. My education includes both a BA in theatre and an MFA in stage management, followed by professional work as a stage manager and production manager of theatre and dance. I know that my own professional successes were due to a combination of my formal education and on-the-job training. I needed all of it to get where I am today. And I suspect that is not unique.

When I began this survey project, I was looking to make curriculum changes to fill in what I considered avoidable gaps in the students' education in a BFA program with an emphasis in stage management at a doctoral/research university. Somehow I expected that looking closely at the "elite" training programs would teach me the secret to creating a plan of study with no compromises. Since then I have changed schools and I now find myself building an emphasis in stage management at a smaller liberal arts college that has long had student stage managers but not specific training. I was initially apprehensive about what I might no longer be able to provide students but have instead found that I am changing only my approach—not my philosophy.

I titled this article "Stocking the Kit" because that is a key metaphor in my teaching approach. The kit is an iconic image for stage managers. Over the course of a career their beloved tackle boxes will grow, and sometimes adopt wheels, so that by the end it is nearly bursting with all of the unusual tools that have become useful over the years and it now seems difficult to do the job without.

In my mind, the education of a stage manager involves building a different, less tangible kind of kit. By the time young stage managers graduate from college, I want them to have the skills and self-confidence to seek further study or professional work in their field. They should possess a good basic kit of knowledge that includes a number of tools they like and know well, but which still contains open slots for discoveries to come. I have a list of my standard kit items, but each stage manager develops his or her own favorites. Student should feel like they understand what it takes to do the job well, and be ready for new experiences to hone these skills.

I am heartened that this research suggests that my plan of study, which combines good basic training, a small amount of advanced coursework, and show-specific mentoring, is a widely shared approach. And I am equally encouraged to learn that when asked to identify something missing in their programs or something they would do differently, the responses from even the strongest programs suggest that they are still looking to improve them.

This research is not complete, however, without asking, What do our students think? Are our perspectives and curricular goals accurate? Do students believe that when they leave college they have what they need? What things would they add to their college education—or do they find that their first foray into the professional world is the correct final step of their educational journey? Perhaps these questions will be the beginning of further research. ❖

***Laurie Kincman** is an AEA Stage Manager and an Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse, heading the Stage Management and Arts Administration emphases in the Department of Theatre Arts. She is a member of USITT and the Midwest Regional Section.*

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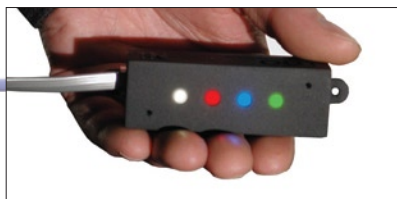
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